

The Fractured Centre: Ecological Mimicry in Natalia García Freire's *This World Does Not Belong to Us*

Pusat yang Retak: Mimikri Ekologis dalam “This World Does Not Belong to Us” Karya Natalia García Freire

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Received 2 October 2025; Accepted 2 December 2025; Published 31 December 2025

Keywords

colonial discourse; ecological mimicry; postcolonial theory; mimicry and ambivalence; environmental narrative.

Abstract

Natalia Garcia Freire's *This World Does Not Belong To Us* (2022) is an uncanny representation of the ecological haunting of Lucas and his father, engaging with colonial discourse and dispossession. This paper aims to examine how Freire's novel deploys a paradigm of “ecological mimicry” by integrating Bhabha's theory of colonial ambivalence and mimicry, extending Derrida's concept of discourses and the instability of meaning. Both Derrida and Bhabha provide frameworks that reveal the instability of colonial discourse, which achieves its “origin” through the narration of repetition and difference. Employing a close reading and contextual postcolonial analysis, the paper examines how Lucas and his father perform colonial ambivalence as dispossessed subjects through ecological haunting and identification with nature. Extending Derrida and Bhabha's theories rooted in discursive narratives, this study develops the concept of “ecological mimicry” to analyze Lucas' resistance and resignification, deriving new meanings of identity and belonging. The analysis demonstrates the inversion and destabilization of colonial hierarchies through ecological mimicry. The study thus aims to contribute to postcolonial ecological criticism by expanding on Derrida and Bhabha's frameworks into environmental narrative contexts.

Kata kunci

diskursus kolonial; mimikri ekologis; teori pascakolonial; mimikri dan ambivalensi; narasi lingkungan.

Abstrak

Novel *This World Does Not Belong To Us* (2022) karya Natalia Garcia Freire merupakan representasi mengerikan tentang *ecological haunting* yang dialami oleh Lucas dan ayahnya, yang berkelindan dengan diskursus kolonial dan perampasan ruang. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menguji bagaimana novel Freire menerapkan paradigma “mimikri ekologis” dengan mengintegrasikan teori ambivalensi dan mimikri kolonial dari Bhabha, serta memperluas konsep diskursus dan instabilitas makna dari Derrida. Baik Derrida maupun Bhabha menyediakan kerangka kerja yang menyingkap instabilitas diskursus kolonial, yang mencapai “asal-usulnya” melalui narasi pengulangan dan perbedaan. Dengan menggunakan pembacaan mendalam (*close reading*) dan analisis pascakolonial kontekstual, makalah ini menguji bagaimana Lucas dan ayahnya menampilkan ambivalensi kolonial sebagai subjek yang terampas haknya melalui *ecological haunting* dan identifikasi dengan alam. Dengan memperluas teori Derrida dan Bhabha yang berakar pada narasi diskursif, studi ini mengembangkan konsep “mimikri ekologis” untuk menganalisis perlawanan dan signifikasi ulang Lucas, sehingga menghasilkan makna baru mengenai identitas dan rasa memiliki. Analisis ini mendemonstrasikan pembalikan dan destabilisasi hierarki kolonial melalui mimikri ekologis. Dengan demikian, studi ini bertujuan untuk berkontribusi pada kritik ekologi pascakolonial dengan memperluas kerangka kerja Derrida dan Bhabha ke dalam konteks narasi lingkungan.

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How to cite this article (using APA 7th edition)

Bhave, A. (2025). The fractured centre: Ecological mimicry in Natalia Garcia Freire's *This World Does Not Belong to Us*. *Journal of Literature and Education*, 3(2), 199–204. <https://doi.org/10.69815/jle.v3i2.190>

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A. Introduction

This World Does Not Belong To Us (2022) by Natalia Garcia Freire is an uncanny and gothic representation of Lucas's "house" and the arrival of two strangers named Felisberto and Eloy, and their seepage into the land, not just an attempt to materially possess it, but as they arrived, uninvitedly and slowly, insidiously made the "house" their own. Natalia Garcia Freire's work is a careful and witty symbolic representation of colonial authority through the storytelling of human greed and possession. The book explores the gradual dispossession of the narrator and his family of their land, belonging and identity. As a critique of colonial legacy, the text incorporates gothic and uncanny imagery of a darker world that Lucas, the narrator, trusts. Insects and nature in the text act as a prime symbol of rooted indigenous identity and the portrayal of ecological hauntings as a subversive force against colonial authority.

Jacques Derrida's critique of and opposition to structuralist thought begin with the redefinition of the "center" upon which such thought heavily relies. Derrida's claim that the "center" is an illusion of stability, presence, and mastery is extended by Homi K. Bhabha into a postcolonial theoretical approach. In "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Bhabha extends Derrida's thought regarding the crisis of representation to describe colonial discourse as a "forked tongue" that contradicts its own foundation. The colonized subject, being "almost the same, but not quite" via mimicry of the colonizer, creates an ambivalent, unstable identity, which Bhabha explores through the Derridean destabilization of the "center." Bhabha asserts that colonial discourse is conflictual, ambivalent, and riven with contradictions. Consequently, the relations between the colonizer and the colonized prevent any stable identities, functioning instead as a negotiation and a transaction (Nayar, 2008, p. 27).

Ashcroft et al. (2000) define mimicry and hybridity as a "cultural negotiation," while Upstone (2009) extends Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence to examine diasporic and cultural belonging. Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry and ambivalence has been predominantly applied to and analyzed within Third World postcolonial fiction and the cultural frameworks of postcolonial studies. However, there are limited existing studies on the application of its discursive nature and the negotiatory formation of identity from an ecological perspective. Glotfelty (1996, p. xix) defines ecocriticism as an examination of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; she further extends this as a critical stance and a theoretical discourse that negotiates between the human and the non-human.

In her introduction, Glotfelty surveys the "environmentally enlightened" works of fiction and poetry by writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker. Recent studies have investigated postcolonial subversion through deconstruction (Rahman & Kholid, 2025) and the interrogation of traditionalism and modernity within transcultural narratives (Yassine, 2025). This paper extends the enquiry of postcolonial frameworks into the ecological domain. Freire's portrayal of ecological haunting, coupled with the narrative symbolism of colonial dispossession, broadens the horizon of ecocritical studies and postcolonial frameworks. By analyzing Freire's narrative, this study enhances the limited exploration of ecocritical postcolonial narratives to demonstrate a new paradigm formation.

This paper aims to analyze *This World Does Not Belong To Us* (2022) to demonstrate the formation of a new paradigm by extending Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry to merge environmental relationship frameworks with colonial discourse theory. It argues that mimicry, which produces an instability of identity through ambivalence and a "fractured center" in Freire's novel, creates an "ecological mimicry" that acts as a subversive and resignifying force through deconstruction. By applying Derrida and Bhabha's theoretical frameworks, Freire's text reveals the instability of belonging and identity, signaling the emergence of a new paradigm from an ecological angle as a subversion of colonial authority. Thus, this paper conducts a postcolonial literary analysis of Freire's novel to demonstrate the formation of this paradigm through the analysis of mimicry and ambivalence beyond existing interpretations, extending its scope into ecocriticism.

Derrida's critique of a stable "center" is rooted in his denial of metaphysics and structuralist thought that rely on binary oppositions for classification and the derivation of a stable "center"; according to Derrida, this is paradoxical because the "center" both belongs to the structure and escapes it (Derrida, 2001, p. 915). Bhabha's extension of this concept occurs when he characterizes colonial discourse as a "forked tongue" rather than "false," implying it is inherently unstable with internal contradictions, a state of "instability" that Derrida uses to describe all discourse (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126).

Freire's novel opens with Lucas, the protagonist, addressing his father about the state of their land, which has been occupied by two visitors, Felisberto and Eloy. Their gradual occupation of the "house" is a result of the father's partial mimicry as he attempts to identify with both figures, who symbolize colonial

authority. Derrida's extension of the concept of "no absolute center" is defined by a "play" of "differences." Derrida insists that once a structure is decentered, "free play," where meaning is never fully present, becomes a play of differences where meaning both differs and is deferred through combinations and substitutions (Derrida, 2001, p. 921). Bhabha extends this by pointing out the strategic confusion between "the metonymic" and "the metamorphic." Mimicry, acting as a destabilizer of colonial classification systems, mixes metaphor (substitution) with metonymy (association), rendering the stability of the colonial discourse incoherent (Bhabha, 1984, p. 132).

B. Method

This research employs a qualitative interpretive design to conduct a close reading and textual analysis of Natalia Garcia Freire's *This World Does Not Belong To Us* (2022). The primary data consists of narrative excerpts, which are subjected to an eco-critical reading focused on narrative symbolism. To analyze the power dynamics within the text, the study utilizes a postcolonial framework, integrating Derrida's assertion regarding the instability of meaning and the "fractured center" alongside Bhabha's concepts of colonial mimicry and ambivalence. The methodology involves a conceptual extension of these frameworks, using them as primary lenses to investigate specific textual scenes. Through this analysis, the Father and Lucas are elucidated as dispossessed colonial subjects, allowing for a deep examination of colonial ambivalence and the inherent instability of identity. The textual analysis demonstrates how the "partial mimicry" of the father and Lucas's subsequent inversion of hierarchies reveal the formation of the study's central paradigm: "ecological mimicry." By merging environmental symbolism with postcolonial discourse, the research demonstrates how identity in Freire's novel is negotiated through a lens that is both ecological and subversive.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Father as the Mimic

This section interprets mimicry and ambivalence in Freire's novel, exploring the father's character as a dispossessed colonial subject. It indicates how his mimicry becomes a site of conformity, unpacking the paradox of Bhabha's theory of colonial ambivalence; his mimicry ultimately leads to failure and decay, a result of ecological displacement.

But today, we shall try it for our guests! One should always be ready to eat new things, try new things! (Freire, 2022, p. 39).

Lucas's father remarks this when his mother interrupts Felisberto and Eloy to convey that the family does not eat venison. Lucas expresses his fear regarding his father's "behaving so oddly," which he describes as "good-natured," "refined," and a submissive, docile creature (Freire, 2022, p. 41). The father's successful, willful appropriation by colonial authority into a double articulation of mimicry and colonial ambivalence is outlined in Lucas's observation of him. He further describes his father and the rest of the family as a "flock of mutilated sheep" at the side of Felisberto and Eloy when they struck him (Freire, 2002, p. 80).

Bhabha describes Foucault's "genealogical gaze" in the postcolonial context as looking at origins and identities not as unified, but as fragmented and dispersed (Bhabha, 1984, p. 129). Lucas, in this case, views his family and his father through the gaze of otherness, where the family is successfully appropriated by the colonial authority of Felisberto and Eloy into a partial mimic of themselves. The mimicry is, however, fractured and contradictory because it exists as a partial representation of the recognized colonized subject (Bhabha, 1984, p. 127). This partial representation of mimicry by the father indicates decay and failure due to its fracturedness. By forcing himself into submission under the guise of still holding authority, the father mimics in a way that, as Bhabha argues, reveals "slippage" and "excess" in the process, exposing its partial, repetitive presence. The "good-natured" and "refined" behavior depicts "civilized" signifiers as opposed to the signifiers "savage/uncivilized." It associates the father's mimicry

with a search for a stable “center” that instead reveals an unstable chain of signifiers through a repetition of his ambivalence.

“Under my roof, we do as I command,” uttered by the father, is an assertion of the patriarchal authority of the house operated under a false consciousness, with Felisberto and Eloy acting as the oppressors (Freire, 2022, p. 151). Derrida’s claim on the impossibility of totalization and meaning, extended, and deferred into a chain of substitutions and combinations, is extended by Bhabha to show mimicry as a repetition of partial presence (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). The phrase “almost the same, but not quite” shows the ambivalence in the father’s character, who attempts to establish control and stability over himself through identifying with Felisberto and Eloy. The repeated submission to identify with Felisberto and Eloy shows his own instability as the patriarch, resulting from his partial mimicry of the oppressors.

The father’s partial mimicry indicates a double articulation. Lucas recalls that his father reminded him of “Napoleon but with a defeated demeanor” (Freire, 2022, p. 30). This resemblance, tinged with defeat, exposes the father’s self-discipline as an unstable entity in Lucas’s eyes. It further reveals that the subsequent collapse of his so-called authority is grounded in his civilized behavior and in his repeated submission to colonial norms. The role of the father’s mimicry as double articulation is revealed in the instability of his authority and self-discipline, which are shown to be contradictory. It partially recognizes the father’s so-called authority while simultaneously establishing the ambivalence of that very authority.

When the house is run by Felisberto and Eloy, who had initially arrived as visitors, and Lucas’s mother is taken away as a result of “emotional degradation,” the father, as the mimic, experiences a double articulation of his mimicry that eventually leads to decay and failure. Bhabha describes the double articulation of mimicry as both affirming colonial authority and undermining it. The colonized subject is disciplined into colonial norms, but in doing so, exposes the constructedness and contradictions of those norms, reflecting their desire to emerge as authentic (Bhabha, 1984, p. 129). His father, as described by Lucas, was ultimately “deformed by a reality” only he had perceived and succumbed to death. Lucas adds that he noticed his father’s diseased ankle, which looked “the same as Eloy’s” (Freire, 2022, p. 173).

The instability of his father’s control, rooted in his partial mimicry with no defined center or origin, reveals colonial discourse as a historical illusion. This reflects the irony of mimicry as being “almost the same, but not quite.” The father’s insistence on adherence to colonial norms, performing partial mimicry, results in his physical decay and the failure of his authority. The “diseased ankle,” denoting material and bodily decay, suggests the consequences of ecological dispossession in addition to the destabilization and collapse of his authority. His rejection of traditions and the norms of his origins, combined with the sudden welcoming attitude toward new food and the new rules of Felisberto and Eloy, lead to his own deformed reality. His partial mimicry differs from Lucas’s, where both characters, as ecologically dispossessed colonized subjects, exercise mimicry differently. The father succumbs to his so-called authority, while Lucas resists through the natural world of insects, exercising “ecological mimicry” as explored in the next subsection.

2. Lucas as the Deconstructing Resistance

The instability of the father’s authority and his ultimate decay are grounded in his self-discipline and his failure to respond to his ecological dispossession with anything but a performed partial mimicry as a colonized subject. Derrida extends Levi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage to reveal the impossibility of totalization and the assemblage of a “supplement” that functions as a new “center” (Derrida, 2002, p. 924). This section articulates Lucas’s enactment of “ecological mimicry,” which serves as a “supplement,” replacing the stringent, virtual colonial center rooted in partial mimicry. Furthermore, this section demonstrates an inversion of the colonial dichotomy that functions on binary categorizations, shifting from “civilized/savage” to “human/nature.”

“But God did not know what I know, God did not know how to teach man to decompose, to relinquish his voice and words, rise up and escape from his man’s body, which is only a pupa” (Freire, 2022, p. 49).

Lucas reconfigures his identity, haunted by the psychological and physical effects of his dispossession from the natural environment, to gain a sense of belonging. As a colonized subject under the occupation of Felisberto and Eloy’s authority, Lucas rejects the elusive “center” projected in his father’s mimicry. Lucas’s obsession with his knowledge and his urge to integrate himself with it to “rise up” and “escape

from a man's body" after decomposition to merge with nature indicates his stance on his father's partial mimicry and the instability of his preconceived "illusive center." His sustained connectivity with the ecological landscape, specifically soil and insects, articulates his enactment of ecological mimicry; this is his own established ecological "center" that becomes a subversive tool of resistance.

"I wander through each room and know they are there, that they always have been. That, inside this house, only they will remain, minuscule beings that will outlast us. Only Flesh can save us" (Freire, 2022, p. 185).

The father's elusive center and his authority, resulting from his mimicry, associate with the colonizers, metonymizing itself, and expose its instability and ambivalence as stated by Bhabha. Lucas situates himself within the metonymic, repositioning the psychological and physical effects of ecological dispossession into a substitution: a newfound center through ecological mimicry. Derrida describes deconstruction as an act of "reversal of hierarchies"; to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts or the hierarchical opposition it relies on (Barry, 2009, p. 102).

The concepts of "decomposition" and "rising up" into an ecological form, from a "pupa" to "flesh," indicate Lucas's reaction to dispossession as a colonial subject, redefining his identification with the ecological landscape instead of surrendering to colonial norms. Lucas's assertion of "flesh" being their only savior indicates resistance and his sense of belonging to the ecological landscape. Lucas's ecological center, his identification with the natural world that substitutes the stringent established colonial center, enacts ecological mimicry through the reversal of the hierarchical opposition of colonial classification systems. The preconceived binary categorizations imposed on the colonial subject, such as savage versus civilized, are deconstructed by Lucas into an inversion of hierarchies with the manifestation of his ecological center, reintegrating the dichotomy of "nature to human."

The novel ends with Lucas's unexpected surrender and withdrawal to nature, burying the house and himself in the soil to ultimately decompose through the insects. The ending can be viewed as a return to ecological origins and a rejection of the identity imposed by colonial discourse. Lucas decides to become a mimic of nature by reversing his father's idea of mimicry with the oppressors through a subversive act of "becoming one with nature." Lucas's final descent into the soil, decomposed by insects, reconceptualizes the subversion of ecological mimicry. This is paralleled to the failure of the father's partial mimicry and achieved through the deconstruction of the colonial hierarchies imposed upon him.

"Flesh" becomes the indicator of his surrender to ecological origins and his complete identification with the merging of nature. The reversal of hierarchies is showcased as partial mimicry is defeated by ecological mimicry, defined by the substitution of a new center. Ecological mimicry, in this case, acts as a force in dismantling the "forked" nature of colonial discourse, ultimately revealing partial mimicry as a "center" that is imaginary, contradictory, and fractured.

D. Conclusion

This article has introduced the paradigm of "ecological mimicry" as an ecocritical framework for reimagining the subversion of colonial classification systems in postcolonial literary representations. It builds upon Derrida's assertion of all discourse as a "repetition of combinations and significations" and its extension of Bhabha's claim regarding the ambivalence and partial repetition of colonial mimicry. The father's self-discipline and conformity, a result of ecological displacement, is rooted in his orientation toward mimicking colonial authority, revealing his "historically elusive" center. Lucas's ecological center, enacting a resistance, replaces this mimicry by inverting the colonial hierarchy and returning to origins through decomposition into nature.

This article contributes to postcolonial studies by integrating an ecological perspective and broadening the scope of cultural and diasporic analysis within postcolonial frameworks. Freire's novel depicts fictional narratives merging environmental and ecological reimagination, anchoring the study in a broader arena of postcolonial literary fiction. This study's exploration of Freire's narrative, which develops the paradigm of "ecological mimicry," positions its relevance in understanding postcolonial identity through non-human counter-discourses.

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